



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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The Rich Life

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 31, 2016
The Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost—Based on Luke 12:13-21*

In the verses right before the Gospel passage we just heard, we learn that Jesus has been teaching his disciples and healing. Crowds are drawn to Jesus. They keep gathering, increasing: “The crowd gathered by the thousands, so that they trampled on one another.” [Luke 12:1] Even with those crowds pressing round, Jesus is first teaching his disciples—serious teaching: “When they bring you before the synagogues, the ruler, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say: for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.” [Luke 12:12]

Then someone in the crowd says to Jesus, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” What?? Completely out of the blue, no relation to what Jesus is talking about. Then, as now, there’s always that tangent person, right? The one who interjects/interrupts with a completely different, personal agenda. This guy seems to want to co-opt Jesus’ moral authority for his own purposes.

Rules for inheritance were clearly spelled out in the Hebrew Scriptures, and rabbis were expected to interpret the application of the inheritance rules and to arbitrate disputes. It was clear: the oldest son was to inherit twice the share of each other son. We don’t know the specifics, but we can tell this man has a problem, and it seems to be with joint ownership. This man, for whatever reasons, seems to want to separate from his brother—maybe like the younger son (in the parable of the father and two sons) who demanded his share of his inheritance early and left home.

Whatever the details, we can tell there’s been a rupture in relationship. How many of us know, some of us all too personally, of family relationships that have become strained, or even blown apart, over an inheritance? The inheritance doesn’t even have to be worth a lot. We can fight over an old cooking pot or rocking chair as bitterly as over a fortune.

Instead of letting himself get triangled, Jesus turns this into a teachable moment for everyone. He perceives the underlying issue of the man’s question and addresses everyone gathered: “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Ah, possessions. They are still with us. Not just a 1st-century issue. As New Yorkers, we live in one of the premier shopping areas of the world. We can find just about everything within a small radius here. And what we may not want to go out to look for/buy, we can order online and have delivered directly to our door. Eternal mystery: I go to Costco for one thing, say vitamins, and come out with many things, like enough Windex to last the rest of my natural life. Paradoxically, many of us live in apartments with famously little space, so we don’t have much room for many possessions.

I was reflecting on today’s readings last weekend while *not* going to Costco but cowering inside my apartment during the heat wave, intermittently reading *The New York Times*. Suddenly I came upon an article about helping seniors downsize—something my parents, children of the Depression, were simply never able to manage. One sentence in the article leapt out at me: “The probability of people divesting themselves of their belongings decreases each decade after

age 50.” Oh, no! De-cluttering and cleaning out is not going to get easier—it’s only going to get harder. The scales fell from my eyes. I leapt up and cleaned out a closet. (1)

Jesus isn’t talking about de-cluttering or cleaning out closets. Jesus isn’t saying possessions in themselves are a bad thing. We need a certain amount to live. Jesus isn’t even saying an abundance of possessions is a bad thing. Jesus is inviting us to examine our attitude toward our possessions, and how we own them—or how they may own us.

Jesus names greed. Greed: the overwhelming urge to have more and more of something, usually more than we really need. Greed keeps us focused on self. Greed produces an almost gravitational force of self-absorption that “wreaks havoc on individuals and nations alike.” (2)

To invite the crowd to examine their own hearts, Jesus tells the crowds a parable of a rich man whose land produced so abundantly that he decides to tear down his current barns and build bigger ones to hold all the produce.

There’s no indication the man did anything illegal or mistreated anyone to become rich. There’s no indication the abundant harvest was even his doing—it could have been a lucky weather year. Now, it’s not a bad thing to make practical preparations for the future, or to provide for one’s family. It’s not even bad to eat, drink and be merry; Jesus was known to do all of those things. But Jesus makes the link between possessions and personal relationships.

Did you notice the conversation the rich man has with himself ... “I, I, I ... my, my, my”? That’s not so unusual for our time. It’s been said we are living in a narcissistic culture. And our culture is certainly individualistic. But this would have been *really* odd for a 1st-century Mediterranean man, who had no identity outside his family, his clan, his village. Wouldn’t he have had this conversation with some of them? A small detail, but telling—perhaps indicating his relationship with his possessions takes precedence over his relationships with people in his life, if there are people in his life.

In this weekend’s *New York Times*, there is a story of Bernhardt Wichmann III (Ben), a man who might be this rich man’s opposite. Ben was a Korean War vet, lost his voice mysteriously in the early 1980’s, had no living family. Since 1991, Ben had lived in a tiny third-floor room in a single-room-occupancy residence at the corner of East 74th Street and Third Avenue here in Manhattan. That room cost \$10 a day. Ben had few possessions and scraped by on his Social Security. In a city where so many have so much, Ben had practically nothing. Ben made friends on his walks in the neighborhood. He communicated through smiles and written messages on small scraps of paper. He had almost nothing, but Ben still gave folks small gifts, like a cup of coffee for a doorman; folks gave him gifts. Ben was rich in relationships and community. In turn, Ben’s happiness and kindness enriched the lives of those who knew him. (3)

All parables—and Jesus was a master teller of parables—invite us to question our own hearts. This parable invites us to consider our own relationship with our possessions.

But Jesus’ parable doesn’t stop there. It pulls us even deeper. God says to the rich man, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

We know that. As the sayings go: “You can’t take it with you” and “There are no pockets in a shroud.” An experienced pastor once said he had heard many different regrets expressed by people at the end of life, but there was one regret he’d never heard expressed. He’d never heard anyone say, “I wish I hadn’t given so much away. I wish I had kept more for myself.” (4)

We can help you with this! There is a Stewardship table right there, at the back of the church. And we have the Mosaic Society to help you leave assets to St. Bart’s in your will.

This very night, or this very day, our life may be demanded of us. That’s the part we don’t like to think about. Though, as we’re reminded, none of us gets out of this alive.

This month I took a course with the Psychotherapy and Spirituality Institute (PSI). We are fortunate that two of PSI’s counselors have offices here at St. Bart’s and are our valued colleagues. One of the course topics was grief and loss, particularly loss from death. The teacher for that topic reminded us that Freud said it is impossible for us humans to imagine our own death; it is impossible for us to imagine the world without us in it—humans are just not “wired” that way. That was actually comforting to me. No wonder it’s so hard.

We do not like to think about our own death. I find myself assuming I (still) have unlimited time. But I don’t. None of us does.

Sometimes death comes all too suddenly, as we hear in the news every week, even every day, now. Sometimes we do get advance notice, a wake-up call, in the form of a health scare, a near-accident, a serious diagnosis. Any of us who have ever had such a wake-up call, or who have companioned a loved one through such a time, knows how suddenly our perspective can shift. Things that once seemed so important (all those things on the two-page to-do list) suddenly aren't important any more. Nothing like a crisis to focus, or jump-start, one's prayer life. Death has a way of clarifying what really matters.

Jesus doesn't tell this parable to give answers. Instead, Jesus' parable invites each of us to ask ourselves: What really matters in my life? Who, and where, is God in my life? How am I investing my life energy and the gifts that God has given me? Where am I on the spectrum between self-absorption and generosity?

Where are the "gravitational forces" in our lives pulling us? Toward ourselves and our passing desires? Toward God and our neighbors? How are we participating in God's work of blessing and redeeming the world?

These questions point us to ways we can be rich toward God. These are important questions, among the most important questions we can entertain and wrestle with.

May we have grace to wrestle honestly with these questions. May our wrestling make us richer—richer toward God.

Amen.

(1) <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/24/realestate/helping-the-elderly-downsize.html>

(2) *Greed*, by Phyllis A Tickle, in *The Seven Deadly Sins* series, The New York Public Library and Oxford University Press, 2004.

(3) http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/30/nyregion/a-voiceless-man-whose-spirit-spoke-volumes.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=second-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=0

(4) http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1725]